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HENRY WARD BEECHER.



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HENRY WARD BEECHER.

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GOD'S DEAR CHILDREN.

"Be ye therefore followers of God as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us."—
EPH. v., 1, 2.

The figure of *following* may be drawn from any of several sources. A soldier follows his leader; and sometimes in sacred Scripture following is set forth by that figure. Scholars, also, according to the Oriental method of instruction, where the teacher walks in some shaded garden, follow their instructor. The Rabbi, in Palestine, with a band of disciples, moved from village to village, teaching the people; and so this, too, is a scriptural figure. The sheep follow the shepherd; and that also is scriptural. But the image we have here is that of little children following after their parents; and no picture could be more charming than that which rises to the imagination of everyone who has been blest in his home childhood,—the figure of little children watching their mother, running after her if she leaves the room, crying for her, clinging to her, asking to be lifted by her, dependent, seeking their own little liberty always within the scope of her eye.

Now, we are to follow God as dear children; and he, therefore, is to be to us of necessity a father, or we cannot follow him as children. If, to our conception, therefore, he is a God of fate, whose decrees are fitful coercions; if our conception of God is that of one in whom is all power, and all will, and a rightful willfulness, it is impossible for us to follow such an ideal of God as dear children. Or, if he be to our imagination intellectualized into an abstract God of

perfect purity, with such a revulsion from evil and discord and sin that he cannot for a moment tolerate it in the universe, but sits conscious of his own everlasting purity, demanding purity in every one inexorably, you cannot follow such an aspect of God as dear children. A child can follow a smiling mother or a benignant father ; but you cannot persuade a child to follow a stern-browed stranger, nor any one that stands in the attitude of a judge, whose face is clothed with frowns. Children flee from such a face. It is not in nature that they should be attracted to it. You can drive them after, but they will not follow, under such circumstances. And if we are to follow God as dear children, it must be because God is such a one as we can follow ; one so full of all compassion, so full of all love, and so full of the patience and self-sacrifice that we associate with fatherhood on earth—only higher, richer, more multiform, inexhaustible—that when we look up, to our throbbing, filial love there shall answer the ocean love of One who knows better how to love than we, who created love, and in whom it resides, primal, everlasting.

So the Apostle calls those who were newly gathered into the Christian Church to follow God as dear children ; and when we follow God as dear children, we follow him as Father ; and that takes us back to the Lord's prayer, where we are taught to pray, "Our Father"—each one of us, each individual, each personal heart ; and not only that, but "Our Father which art in Heaven"—lifted up above human imperfection ; lifted up above human organization : not God enshrined in an ordinance ; not God enshrined in a church ; not God enshrined in human society or in universal human nature ; not a widely distributed, pantheistic God ; but "our Father," personality calling for personality, and "our Father which art in Heaven," invisible, universal, and not represented by any human form, nor embodied in any human organization.

But take notice : "Be ye followers of God as dear children ;" and that ye may so follow, and as the means, the method, the indispensable condition, of following, "walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself

for us." That is the method by which dear children are to follow their Father. They are to do it by walking in the way of love, as he dwells in love, administers by its powers, and makes it the test of that character which shall survive death and live through immortal spheres. So we are to follow him. We are to follow him in that spirit.

And it is not a figure of speech alone. If I may so say, it is that very atmospheric condition of the soul by which you shall appreciate the truth in God, the personality of God, and all the duties that you are called upon to perform as the followers of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are just hearing from the various scientific corps that have gone out from all civilized nations to witness the transit of Venus across the surface of the sun ; and we have learned that on the day appointed some of them, after infinite pains, after months, and it may be said years, of preparation, found storms beating down through the air, blinding them ; and, all day long, they might just as well have gazed into midnight. The atmosphere was in such a condition that they saw not a glimpse, and folded their instruments, and returned home as wise as they went. And there were parties that were stationed at other points of observation, where, although the rain did not descend and beat upon them, clouds hung dark and low, and would not separate ; and they returned home. The condition of seeing that magnificent orb was not granted to them. And there were other parties with whom the clouds played coquetties, and opened and shut ; and they got glances and visions. The first contact and the second contact were lost, and the third was gained ; or the first and second and third were gained, and the last was lost, and so on. They returned home somewhat wiser ; but still it was not a propitious heaven. Only they answered the end for which they had taken such extraordinary pains, and gone forth on such a long journey, whose whole sky was open and clear, and who saw the planet advancing to the sun, touching it, passing over and leaving it. The atmosphere was everything. No matter how wise the men were, how perfect the telescope was, or how admirable the structure which enclosed it ; if the atmosphere was not right, they lost everything.

Now, in the Christian life, the atmosphere is everything. They that will see God must have the atmosphere through which alone he can be discerned ; and that is the atmosphere of love. So that, while we are followers as children, we must follow the Father who dwells in love, and who is Love, and we must walk in love, or we can neither understand him, perceive him, nor receive benefit in any material degree from him.

So then, I read again (for the text is always better than the sermon) :

"Be ye therefore followers of God as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us."

Out of this fundamental and vital quality there will spring up many other forms of inspiration ; but the root-form, the foundation, the fundamental element, of Christian life, is to lie in that love to God which dear children have to a parent, and which Jesus Christ made manifest by his walk and conversation.

We have heard much clamor and much dispute as to what are fundamental doctrines. There are no fundamental doctrines. There are doctrines fundamental to philosophical systems. Arminianism has certain vital doctrines ; it cannot be Arminian without them. The Manichean heresy had vital points which were essential to it. The Calvinistic scheme has its vital points without which it cannot be Calvinistic. There may be such things as vital or fundamental doctrines in reference to a system ; but there are no fundamental doctrines in reference to the human heart or to a Christian life. The requisition for a life of Christianity, is, *Walk in love*. That is the fundamental element. Out of that other things shall come. Without that, come what may, it is all void and vain.

How long shall we need to go without an adequate interpretation of the 13th of Corinthians, where Paul, with every form of speech which belongs to eloquence, declared that men might know all, believe all, do all, practice every external charity, but unless they had love it should profit them nothing, but should be as "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." With this glorious descent hanging in the air,

hundreds and thousands of years have rolled away in the war of the world, men quarrelling, and shedding each other's blood, and burning each other at the stake, on account of doctrines that had nothing to do with love, and of which a man might believe either way without being better or worse.

Here is the great quality out of which is to spring whatever else is of vital use—namely, walking with God in that spirit in which Christ walked with us. We are to walk as dear children, trusting, loving, confiding; but out of that spirit, when once it is radicated, and kept vital in us, will come many other experiences. For one may follow God with the reason, the intellect; but, without that spirit, no reason, no intellect, can interpret God. We can learn by the reason; but we may learn much, and that much may not help us.

For instance, if you desired to show how any eminent man looks, it would not be enough that you should paint first an eye on one sheet of paper, and then on another sheet a nose, and then, on another sheet a mouth, and then, on another page a chin, and then, taking these separate organs or features, say, "Combine them and that will show you how he looks." Who could combine them under such circumstances? It is the organic unity of the whole that makes the resemblance to the man. But only when we see one in face and feature do we know him; for men are as different from one another as face and feature are one from another. A man who from his youth has been thoroughly good, cannot understand a man that is thoroughly bad; and a man who from his youth has been thoroughly bad, cannot understand one that is thoroughly good. A miser cannot understand a magnanimous and generous man, any more than a man whose whole joy is in charitable distribution can understand the pleasure that a miser has. We have to be in sympathy with that which we understand. If we are to understand the philosopher, then the reason must be in us which the philosopher uses; and if we are to understand a generous nature, it is because generosity is in us. He who thinks that manhood lies in craft, would despise the old, blunt, square, hard-handed Saxon strength.

Now, a man can understand God as a mechanician, as an

artist, perhaps ; but he who comes to the understanding of God purely by intellection, understands him only, as it were, from without and mechanically, and in the inferior disclosures of the divine nature. For God glories, as he tells us, in his own suffering, in his patience, in his loving-kindness, in his tender mercy ; and no man can understand God who does not go beyond the external attributes, or natural attributes as they are often called, into the disposition of God. We may follow God by veneration, by a worshipful emulation ; but it must be in such a way as dear children can follow. For there are, or have been, I doubt not, to every one of us, moments in which the goodness of our mothers and the superiority of our fathers have acted back upon us, and we have been made to feel how inferior we are to them ; and we look up to them, and we rejoice in that greatness which makes us feel how inferior we are. And so, a loving child of God may rejoice in his own sense of abasement and inferiority, because he loves God ; and out of love there may come veneration, humiliation, and prostration of soul. But without love it is unmanly, it is unworthy in any one ; and that whole system by which men are meant, through a sense of their own sinfulness, to be humble and prostrate before God, is not only derogatory to the supreme idea of manhood, but is degrading to the sense of man ; and men who are all the time looking at their own imperfections and sins, and studying them, and, as it were, stewing them in their own consciousness, and living upon a perpetual sense of their inferiority,—such men are not wholesome minded. That is not the way that dear children live at home. You would not let them. As little as you have of the divine nature in you, you are conscious that that could not be the proper aspect of the experience of children at home ; and that, if they love you and feel the warmth of your love, they cannot forever be abiding in a morbid consciousness of their own weakness, imperfections and misdoings. There must be the upspring of hope and faith and trust and love, or the child cannot be a dear child at home.

And so, in the ministration of the church to men, that is a bad administration which inspires blind veneration ; and

he that shivers in the presence of God is not in God's presence. He has no conception of the true God.

And still less is fear compatible with following God as dear children. There is a filial fear. There is nothing more solicitous than love. A mother knows fear in connection with those children that she loves ; but it is not degrading fear. The child, anxious to please, looks with waiting expectancy to see if its task has pleased father or mother. The child that is learning to write, or that is studying art, and, making sketches, brings them to the teacher or to the parent, comes with a kind of trembling apprehension lest they shall not be approved. That is honorable. That has the approval of affection itself, and it is ennobling. But the fear of anger, the fear of penalty, the fear of our own suffering and loss, is admirable only in very remote degrees, and occasionally, when other motives fail. And yet, there is a filial fear, a love-fear, which not only is permissible, but is honoring and uplifting.

Now, we are not to be members of the church that we may either be awe-smitten, or bowed down with a perpetual recognition of how poor we are, or trembling under the administration of divine purity and divine law. We are to follow as dear children.

Beware, then, I beseech of you who are beginning a Christian life, of substituting anything for the foundation quality of love within you, or of letting anything come between you and that quality.

You are God's. You are not owned by the church. You are not owned by the priest. You are not owned by the minister. You do not belong to any less a personage than God ; and you do not belong to him in the sense of being his slaves or his hirelings. You are his dear children. Yours is all that is God's. If he owns the heavens, you own them. If he owns all sources of joy throughout eternity, you own them. For you are heirs with Christ to the inheritance which he has from God ; and, as dear children of God, you are to live lives of liberty, and hope, and courage, and joy, and trust.

Let us beware, therefore, of all those elements so often

and so grievously met in the experience of men that draw down our allegiance, and make us feel responsible to things lower rather than to things higher.

You are now received into the church ; and did it ever occur to you that Jesus Christ, who founded the Christian church, as we are told, was never a member of it himself ? Did it ever occur to you that the twelve apostles, who are supposed to have been the twelve pillars of the Christian Church, were never members of that church ? Christ was a member of the Jewish Church, and the apostles were all members of the Jewish Church ; but the Christian Church, as distinguished from that, was not founded either in his life-time or in theirs, except among the Gentiles,—and then in the pattern of the Synagogue. You are not to join yourselves, therefore, to an earthly church, under any of those poetic notions, or under any of those heroic emblems, which make the church a representative or a substitute for God. It ought to be much to you, by its fellowship, by its companionship, by its sympathy and by the instructions which you receive in it ; but the church is of value to you only by the value of the results which it produces in you.

What is summer worth in the desert of Sahara ? It found it sand, and leaves it sand. The sun and the summer are worthless to the desert. And what is the church worth to you ? It is worth just what it develops in you, as an educating institution. Its whole design is to hold you up in weak hours ; to inspire you with higher thoughts and with sweeter dispositions ; and to give you power to lift yourself up to the invisible. The church is neither to be worshiped nor to be rested upon. You are not safe because you are in it, any more than the child is learned because it has been at school. The school is of great value ; there knowledge is gained more readily than it can be gained elsewhere : but we do not undervalue it when we say that you should not worship it. And the church—should I disparage that—I, a minister, that have received its blessings, and that have seen them imparted to others ? No ; but its value is in this : that it teaches you to neglect the lower, and to center your affections on the higher. For nothing less than God can satisfy the

human soul,—no ordinance, no service, nothing but love, down-dropping from the everlasting Fountain of sympathy, of pity, and of compassion. The love of God can satisfy you ; and the uniting with the church is good to you just in proportion as you, through the church, look up and see God.

But what an astronomer he would be who should sit at his telescope, watching the instrument, praising its lenses, magnifying the honor of its maker, cleaning, fixing and adjusting it, and never seeing anything through it ! It is what is beyond the telescope, it is what the telescope reveals and brings to you, that gives it its value. Without that, it is good for nothing.

Now the Church is God's telescope ; and if it enables you to see through the visible to the invisible, if it brings you truth, if it brings your time-thoughts into the relations of eternity, if it brings God, as a veritable person—yea, as a Father—near to your heart and near to your moral sense, then it is the Church of God to you. Otherwise, it is the Church of man. If it be opaque ; if it stop your thought with itself, if you have got only so far as that you are a Churchman, you have not started on the true Christian course. You may be a Churchman and be lost. But if the Church is vital to you ; if it is to you a messenger and a help from God, then it is God's, and you see through it and beyond it, and by its help you behold that which is the soul's only estate and only strength—God, our Father; the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour ; and the Divine Spirit, our Enlightener.

Many of you are just beginning your Christian life ; many of you are already experienced soldiers therein : and yet, it is a good thing for you, whether you have had much or little experience as Christians, to count this day as a day of new birth and new life, and to begin from this time forward, according to the spirit of the passage which we have read in your hearing, to live as the dear children of God. For then, when once the habit is formed, and your thoughts run nimbly and easily up, in all circumstances of trial and of temptation, to the bosom of your God, you will find in that communion and in that faith all the strength and all the comfort that any of you need.

No man knows where you will go, or where, in a year, you will be scattered abroad. Tell me, where are the birds that sang in my trees last summer? Tell me, where are the leaves that waved on my trees last summer? Tell me, where are all the flowers that bloomed through the last summer? Who can trace them or find them? And where you shall be in five years; what may have befallen you; what exaltation and prosperity; what new avocation; what drifting far across the sea; what habitation in the wilderness; what deprivations by which ye that are one in love shall be sundered and severed, and walk alone and solitary—who can tell? None. Nor need we desire to look forward with a curious prescience; for there is one thing that, if you only have it—if you have God, the dear Father, and you are dear children, and are walking in love under the providence that works good out of everything for those who love God—it matters little whether you live on the land or on the sea, in your native land or on a foreign shore; whether sickness or poverty comes; or whether disasters and disappointments come. God is the soul's all, and in him you are strong and rich, and may be joyful; and the possession that I long for in every one of you, is this: that, in the church, in your avocations, in your households, in all your companionships and friendships, everywhere, you shall have learned this royal lesson of happiness and safety—how to follow God as dear children, and to walk in love, even as Jesus Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

Now, dearly beloved, with these brief and prefatory remarks, we are (many of you for the first time in your lives, and all of you for the first time under such circumstances as have gathered us here) about to sit together and partake of those emblematic memorials of the Lord Jesus Christ, your Saviour and my Saviour; and in partaking of those symbolic representations—the bread broken, and the wine standing for the blood shed, and the broken bread and the wine both standing as the test of divine love for you—you join together in an hour and under circumstances that will not occur to you again in your life-time. You will never be brought again to the beginning of this experience; a beginning can be but

once ; and to many of you this is the first time. I trust that it is not the most joyful time ; and yet it is an eminently joyful time. My heart goes out to you ; and my longing is not so much for your eminence in this life (though that, too, I sympathize in) as for this : that you may have that stay, that staff, that strength, that sure hold upon God by love, which shall be with you in life and in the valley and shadow of death, and which shall administer unto you a joyful entrance into the kingdom of God, your dear Father.

And I invite all those present, whether they are members of this church or of sister churches, or whether they are not members of any church, who are conscious of their own sinfulness and of their need of pardon and salvation through Jesus Christ, and who earnestly and cordially accept Christ in their thoughts and in their feelings as their Saviour, if it would strengthen them or comfort them—I invite such to unite with us in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And I repeat again, that this ordinance belongs not to the Church, though for the sake of convenience and order the Church administers it. The Church does not own the Lord's Supper any more than the Church owns the Bible. Every man has a right to read the Bible, and every man who has faith in Christ and love toward him has a right to this ordinance ; and I make my invitation as broad as I suppose God would make it if he were to discern the hearts and thoughts and intents of this congregation. None who are careless and heedless, though they be thrice a hundred-fold members of the Church, do I invite. I invite none who take this ordinance simply as a form ; I invite none who take it as a mere amulet or charm ; I invite none who accept it as an outward rite of ecclesiasticism only ; but they who know their own weakness and want, and who with the love of a child cry out, "My Father, help me!" them I invite. To such I say, Come, and let him help you. Your preparation for the Lord's Supper is, that you need it, and know that you need it, and are willing to partake of it.

PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON.

THOU ever blessed God, for the communications of thyself in nature we render thee thanks; and though we glance only upon the surface, and though the revelations of thyself lie yet deeper than human thought hath penetrated, we rejoice in such help, and in the knowledge of more yet to be received, breaking forth into the light of the future. We thank thee for that revelation which thou hast made through holy men of old, that spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.* We rejoice in their experience, in all the knowledge which they gained, in their inspiration by thy personal presence with them, and the lifting up of thy soul upon theirs. But above all, we thank thee for that revelation which thou art day by day making in the hearts of thine own people—thine indwelling; for thou dost come unto them, and dost abide in them, and manifest thyself unto them as thou dost not unto the world. Grant that all of us may have something of this inshining light of God by which all that is of the earth and earthly, and of the flesh and fleshly, and which is opposed to the law of God, and cannot be reconciled to it, may be kept in subjection, and made to serve, and never to rule.

Grant that by thy divine presence whatever in us is like unto thee, of thought, and of feeling, and of imagination, may be so inspired that it shall grow in brightness and in strength until every thought and every feeling is brought into subjection to Jesus Christ.

We thank thee that there are so many who have enlisted in the way of righteousness, and who henceforth are to measure their lives, both within and outwardly, by the simplicity of truth as it is in Jesus. Grant unto them that their joys may abound as the token of thy goodness, and as the evidence of their victories. We beseech thee that they may feel themselves called of God to be God's dear children. May they not come into the service of Christ as slaves, whip-driven. May they not account themselves prisoners in the church of Christ, or hirelings, or burden-bearers and toilers. May they hear the voice of the Master saying to them, Henceforth, I call you not servants, but friends. And may they have an inward experience of thine intimacy with them which shall give them strength in all that is good, aversion to whatever is evil, and power to resist it and overcome it.

We beseech thee that thou wilt grant that by the faith of Jesus their homes may be brighter, and their affections sweeter and purer; that they may live one with another in a more blessed fellowship; and that to all the joys that belonged aforetime to life may be added now, in over-measure, radiant, the joys of the life that impends and soon must come. May all their thoughts, and loves, and purposes, and endeavors, be enshrined in the nobler life that overhangs them. So may they own two worlds, and live in the one as expectants of the other. There is their home whose foundations can never be moved; there is their substance where moth and rust do not corrupt; there are friendships which neither wane nor

perish; there is safety which storms cannot rock nor tempests put out; there is purity without temptation; there are joys without tears or sorrows; there is the perfect life in their Father's home to which they aspire, toward which they are traveling, and which, ere long, some of them will reach; and may all of them have the glorious presentiment of the life above, and the life to come, to draw them, to comfort them, to strengthen them, to inspire them in the life that now is.

And we beseech thee, O thou blessed Spirit, that thou wilt more and more invigorate the purposes of their souls. Add sincerity to sincerity, earnestness to earnestness, and endeavor to endeavor, that they may day by day in the sight of all men, and in the sight of God, ripen for the heavenly life. How many thanks should we give in their behalf! How many have struggled long, but at last are planted in the garden of the Lord! How many have been waiting for years looking through dim mists for the bright vision to break, and have been brought at last to consecrate themselves to Christ without condition, and to accept his services as little children accept the commands of a parent! For how many of these have prayers and tears been given by parents! How many that are with thee in heaven rejoice to-day over their children here! How many are there that in their own heart are rejoicing to think of what father and mother and brother and sister shall say and feel when the tidings of their union with the church have come to them afar off.

God, sanctify the joys of those that are in thy presence, and of all that love them; and may each one be kept severally according to his circumstances. May those who are under circumstances of temptation and trial, and those who are bestead by poverty, and those who are in trouble of any kind, and those who are surrounded by friendships, all of them find that everything works together for good to them that love thee.

And we pray that thou wilt accept the joy and the thanksgiving of this church. It is summer in the midst of winter. It has been harvest-time in the dreary year. We rejoice that thou hast made it a year of inward light, and inward joy, and consecration, and fervor of prayer, and faith and trust in God, and that thou hast made it a year of great growth in grace, and of the plenitude of thy spiritual gifts. Why should we murmur or repine, though the storm rages without? How happy are they round about whom the cottage throws its walls, so that no storm can be upon the hearth-side! And we have been sequestered and sheltered, and the Spirit of God, all peaceful above, the inspiration of light and life and joy, hath been within; and what matters it what is without, so that thou art dwelling with us? Even so, Lord Jesus, still abide with this people. Still commune with each heart, and sanctify to every one all the dealings of thy Providence with him.

And now we pray that thou wilt prepare us all for the remainder of our lives, whether they be longer or shorter. Prepare us for the communion of death. Prepare us for a glorious triumph, as we march through the darkness of the grave to find the eternal life beyond. And then, when we shall have been crowned, and are vic-

tors over life and death—then, when the radiance of immortality is ours, and shines from our eyes and from our crowns—then, we will cast our crowns at thy feet, O Beloved, and cry, with tears of gladness: Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name, be all the praise forever and ever. *Amen.*

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